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INFO AMEMBASSY CAIRO
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AMCONSUL JERUSALEM

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 AMMAN 02299

E.O. 12356: DECL: OADR
TAGS: PGOV SOCI JO
SUBJECT: MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD GOES ON THE WAGON

¶1. CONFIDENTIAL - ENTIRE TEXT.

¶2. SUMMARY. THE MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD IS PRESSING ITS SOCIAL AGENDA ONCE AGAIN, BY TRYING TO BAN ALCOHOL. THE MB PROBABLY KNOWS THAT THIS EFFORT WILL NOT SUCCEED; MORE LIKELY, THE MOVEMENT IS CHAFING UNDER THE BIN SHAKER GOVERNMENT'S TIGHT REINS AND WANTS TO FIGHT BACK, IF ONLY SYMBOLICALLY. THE MB IS NOT WITHOUT STRENGTH; THE GOVERNMENT KNOWS IT CANNOT DIRECTLY CONFRONT THE IKHWAN ON "ISLAMIC" ISSUES LIKE A PROHIBITION ON ALCOHOL. BUT IT CAN -- AND LIKELY WILL -- STUDY THE ISSUE TO DEATH. THE GOVERNMENT HAS NO INTENTION OF ALTERING THE ESSENTIALLY MODERATE SOCIAL IMAGE OF JORDAN. HOWEVER, WHILE IT IS WILLING TO CONFRONT THE MB ON POLITICAL ISSUES LIKE THE PEACE PROCESS, IT WILL TAKE A MORE SUBTLE ROUTE ON SOCIAL MATTERS. END SUMMARY.

¶3. MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD DEPUTIES PUSHED THROUGH PARLIAMENT FEBRUARY 15 A MOTION TO ASK THE GOVERNMENT TO DRAFT LEGISLATION PROHIBITING THE PRODUCTION, SALE AND DISTRIBUTION OF ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGES IN THE KINGDOM. THE MOVE WAS SUPPORTED BY 34 DEPUTIES (INCLUDING THE MB AND INDEPENDENT ISLAMISTS), WITH NO OBJECTIONS AND 20 ABSTENTIONS. SEVERAL DEPUTIES LEFT THE CHAMBER BEFORE THE VOTE. THE DEBATE ENGENDERED HARSH WORDS BETWEEN AN ISLAMIST DEPUTY AND TWO PROMINENT LEFTISTS, ONE OF WHOM RETORTED, "FOR THOSE WHO WANT AN ISLAMIC STATE, GO FORM ONE SOMEWHERE ELSE." HOWEVER, EVEN THESE DEPUTIES DID NOT OPPOSE THE MOTION TO SEND THE ISSUE TO THE GOVERNMENT.

¶4. DESPITE SIGNIFICANT PARLIAMENTARY OPPPOSITION TO A BAN ON ALCOHOL, FEW DEPUTIES SPOKE AGAINST THE MOTION/ REFLECTING THE GENERALLY CONSERVATIVE, MUSLIM NATURE OF SOCIETY HERE. AS ESTABLISHMENT DEPUTY ABD AL-RAUF AL-RAWABDEH TOLD US FEBRUARY 20, NO DEPUTY WANTS TO BE SEEN OPPOSING A MEASURE WHICH IS POPULARLY VIEWED AS AN ISLAMIC DUTY. RAWABDEH SAID HE WAS CERTAIN THAT IF A POPULAR REFERENDUM ON PROHIBITION WERE HELD IN HIS CONSTITUENCY OF IRBID, ALCOHOL WOULD BE BANNED. THE DETRIMENTAL ECONOMIC EFFECTS ON TOURISM AND FOREIGN INVESTMENT WOULD BE NO MATCH FOR A CITATION FROM THE QUR'AN.

¶5. DESPITE HIS OPPOSITION TO PROHIBITION, RAWABDEH VOTED IN FAVOR OF THE MOTION. HE AND OTHER DEPUTIES EXPLAINED THAT THE BEST SOLUTION WAS TO ALLOW THE GOVERNMENT TO STUDY THE MATTER, WHICH IS ALL THE IKHWAN WERE ASKING. THE ECONOMIC IMPACT OF PROHIBITION WOULD BE INCLUDED IN SUCH A STUDY, AND THE ISSUE WOULD BOUNCE BACK AND FORTH BETWEEN THE EXECUTIVE AND LEGISLATIVE BRANCHES UNTIL IT WAS FORGOTTEN. IN THE MEANTIME, NO MUSLIM DEPUTY WOULD OPEN HIMSELF UP TO CHARGES OF NOT BEING FAITHFUL TO HIS RELIGION.

THE MB'S RATIONALE

¶16. THE MB'S ANTI-ALCOHOL MOTION SYMBOLIZES THE GROUP'S CURRENT PREDICAMENT. THE MB, MORE ASSERTIVE DURING THE PREVIOUS MASRI GOVERNMENT, HAS BEEN HAMPERED BY THE MORE POWERFUL BIN SHAKER GOVERNMENT'S WILLINGNESS TO CLAMP DOWN ON MAJOR ISSUES LIKE THE PEACE PROCESS. THE GROUP ALSO REALIZES THAT ITS 1989 IMAGE HAS BEEN TARNISHED BY ITS LACK OF ACCOMPLISHMENTS IN PARLIAMENT AND IN THE BADRAN GOVERNMENT. THE PARLIAMENTARY MOTION IS THUS A MEANS OF RE-POLISHING THAT IMAGE WHILE EMBARRASSING THE GOVERNMENT AND ITS SUPPORTERS.

¶17. WHETHER ALCOHOL IS ACTUALLY BANNED APPEARS TO BE A SECONDARY PRIORITY FOR THE MB. ONE EMBASSY CONTACT WAS TOLD BY THE CHAIRMAN OF THE PARLIAMENTARY COMMITTEE HANDLING THE ISSUE THAT MB DEPUTIES SEEMED RELATIVELY DISINTERESTED IN PUSHING THE GOVERNMENT TO BEGIN ITS STUDY. ALTHOUGH THE PARLIAMENTARIANS HAVE THE AUTHORITY TO DRAFT THE LEGISLATION THEMSELVES, THE MB HAS CHOSEN TO ASK THE GOVERNMENT TO DO SO. THIS WINS THE BROTHERS SOME POINTS WITHOUT HAVING TO TAKE ON THE RESPONSIBILITY OF DRAFTING A MEASURE WHICH COULD THEN BE ATTACKED FOR ITS IMPRACTICALITY OR ECONOMIC INADVISABILITY. INSTEAD, IT CAN SIT AND TAKE POT SHOTS AT THE GOVERNMENT FOR DELAYING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF LEGISLATION CONSISTENT WITH THE QUR'AN. THE MB REMEMBERS HOW MEASURES IT PROPOSED WHILE IT HELD MINISTRIES UNDER THE BADRAN GOVERNMENT LARGEY BROUGHT RIDICULE UPON THE MOVEMENT.

SEGREGATED EDUCATION NEXT?

¶18. WE HAVE RECEIVED AN UNCONFIRMED REPORT THAT THE MB IS ABOUT TO BRING BEFORE PARLIAMENT A REQUEST TO SEGREGATE MEN AND WOMEN IN UNIVERSITIES. AGAIN, WE SEE THE MOVE AS A POLITICAL PLOY RATHER THAN A REAL ATTEMPT TO ACHIEVE THE MB'S SOCIAL AGENDA.

LONGER-TERM REACTION

¶19. THE GOVERNMENT HAS PREDICTABLY STAYED SILENT ON THE PARLIAMENT'S ALCOHOL MOTION, PRESUMABLY PREFERING TO KILL IT BEHIND CLOSED DOORS. HOWEVER, ONE CONTACT TOLD US FEBRUARY 23 THAT THE PRIME MINISTER WAS NOT AMUSED BY THE IKHWAN'S TACTICS. HE REPORTEDLY SENT A MESSAGE BACK TO THE MB THAT THE GROUP SHOULD UNDERSTAND THAT "JORDAN IS NOT ALGERIA." COMMENT: WE CANNOT CONFIRM BIN SHAKER'S ALLEGED REMARK, BUT IF HE DIDN'T SAY IT, HE PROBABLY THOUGHT IT. END COMMENT.

¶10. THE MB'S PARLIAMENTARY MOVES ARE DESIGNED TO RESERVE FOR ITS MEMBERS THE ISLAMIC HIGH GROUND. CENTRISTS HAVE LONG BEEN TELLING US THEY NEED TO PUT UP CANDIDATES IN THE NEXT ELECTIONS WHO CAN COMPETE WITH THE IKHWAN IN STANDARDS OF ISLAMIC PIETY. THE CENTRISTS ARE BEGINNING TO GET A TASTE OF THE KINDS OF ISSUES THEY WILL BE FACING IN THE NEXT CAMPAIGN.

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